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SUBJECT: VIETNAM: WAITING FOR A BIOTECH POLICY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Vietnam may be close to adopting a policy that would allow it to use biotechnology to increase agricultural output and to improve the health of its citizens. Vietnam's position at a biotech crossroads was highlighted during the recent visit of plant biotechnology expert Dr. C.S. Prakash of Tuskegee University. Local biotech experts noted during Dr. Prakash's visit that it could be only a matter of months before the GVN releases a long-awaited policy announcement on agricultural biotechnology. While Vietnam appears to be on the on the right side of the biotech debate, the GVN is still grappling with making the leap from the laboratory to the rice paddy. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) ConGen had the opportunity to sound out local experts on the status of agricultural biotechnology in Vietnam during the September 15-17 visit of Dr. C.S. Prakash, director of Tuskegee University's Center for Plant Biotechnology Research. Dr. Prakash made the case for the benefits of biotech in speeches and meetings with students and experts in Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta cities of Can Tho and An Giang. Prior to coming to southern Vietnam, Dr. Prakash participated in a similar program in Hanoi. He argued that biotechnology is a safe way to increase agricultural productivity and improve the health of consumers in developing countries around the world and Vietnam in particular.

13. (SBU) According to local experts, the GVN has officially identified the development of biotechnology (BT) as a national priority. Professor Nguyen Van Uyen, former Director of the Institute of Tropical Biology and one of Vietnam's leading advocates of biotechnology, observed that the GVN could release its biotech policy in a matter of months. Sixteen universities and institutes in Vietnam are engaged in biotech research. According to Professor Uyen and his colleagues, Vietnamese authorities understand the value and potential benefits of biotechnology for economic development, but they are still grappling with the problem of how to put biotech to work for them. Various Vietnamese government agencies, in conjunction with academia, have been working for more than five years on drafting official policy.

14. (SBU) Pending release of Vietnam's biosafety regime, institutions like Cuu Long Rice Research Institute (CLRRI) in the Mekong Delta are sitting on biotech research that could have rapid benefits for farmers and consumers alike. For example, CLRRI has had great success adapting golden rice technology (rice genetically fortified with vitamin A and iron) in the laboratory, but cannot transmit the technology to the farmer. Five million Vietnamese suffer from anemia and could benefit enormously from golden rice, according to Dr. Prakash's counterparts. These contacts explained that the delay in implementing a biosafety regime is the result of concerns in Hanoi over possible repercussions for Vietnamese exports, especially to Europe. They agreed, however, that little Vietnamese rice was sent to the EU.

15. (SBU) Following implementation of a legal framework, dissemination of biotechnology may be rapid. In the Mekong Delta, Can Tho University, CLRRI and An Giang University appear to have an effective collaboration with each other and with international counterparts, including the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines. For example, researchers share new strains of rice with each other for testing purposes. CLRRI has already had success in transferring new conventional rice varieties to local farmers; 56 percent of Mekong Delta farmers use CLRRI rice varieties. The GVN also has agricultural extension officers in place down to the local level. While open to new varieties, most farmers still cultivate their own seeds to grow crops each season; the concept of buying seed for new crops is still novel and regarded with some suspicion. Local academics noted during Dr. Prakash's visit that it is important that good quality seed be available to farmers when they use biotech rice varieties for the first time. Poor quality seed could convince farmers that biotech varieties are not worth the expense of buying seed every season.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Dr. Prakash's visit highlighted that Vietnam is moving forward on agricultural biotechnology, and has substantial scientific and technical capacity in this area. These scientists are eagerly awaiting biosafety legislation to begin disseminating technology. While Dr. Uyen expects new regulations within months, others say it could be years before the policy takes effect. Dr. Prakash's meetings, speeches, and press coverage were effective in highlighting this pressing issue. END COMMENT.

